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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Health care system at risk under new Medicare changes

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) believes changes to Medicare announced by the Prime Minister yesterday will put our universal health care system at serious risk.

Although Mr Abbott described the changes as “a better package” than the original \$7 co-payment, the reality is both patients and General Practitioners will now suffer from the decision to cut the Medicare rebate by \$5 a visit.

GPs working in low and middle income areas will be hardest hit by the changes should they decide to continue bulk billing those patients in need. Freezing the Medicare rebate for 4 years will further compound the problem.

Eventually, most patients will suffer because doctors will face pressure to demand they pay the \$5 “discretionary” fee rather than absorbing the cost per patient.

AASW National President Karen Healy says while it is pleasing that children under 16, pensioners, veterans and people in nursing homes are excluded from the proposal, price signalling is inappropriate for essential medical services.

“General Practitioners actually save the taxpayer money by providing essential medical services such as immunisations, health screening and assisting people with chronic medical conditions to live and stay well in their communities. The notion of a price signal is not relevant,” says Professor Healy.

“Australians love and are proud of their health care system. While certainly there is a need to contain costs, using blunt price signals is not good policy. The government needs a much more nuanced approach including sensible expenditure on public health initiatives and effective monitoring of issues such as overservicing.”

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